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Giving the contras what they deserve

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua—The Sandinista government has delivered serious blows to the counterrevolutionary movement in three key areas in recent weeks. In this capital, security forces broke up a contra "internal front," while in the southern and northern war zones the Sandinista People's Army made major military gains against the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) and the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN).

An elaborate contra network in Managua and other major cities, which was operating as the nucleus of a nascent FDN operation, was disbanded and publicly exposed in late June. This development has in turn shed new light on the growing convergence between the rightist forces and Catholic church within Nicaragua, and the externally based armed counterrevolutionaries.

Among those implicated in the conspiracy were Catholic priests Amado Pena and Jose Maria Pacheco, prominent figures from the rightist political parties and trade unions aligned with them—including Democratic Conservative Party leader Miriam Arguello and organizers of the Nicaraguan Federation of Workers—and leaders of the Superior Council of Private Enterprise, a club for big business figures.

According to the testimony of those arrested, the immediate aims of this network were to carry out sabotage actions against factories, electrical installations and supply centers, as well as burn buses and place explosives in public places in order to "sow terror and chaos." Nicaragua's chief of state security, Comandante Lenin Cerna, declared that the overall goal of these activities was to help create "a climate favorable for U.S. intervention."

The establishment of an internal front has become a major objective of the counterrevolution since late 1983, when the strategy drawn up by the CIA shifted from seeking a definitive contra military victory over the Sandinistas to waging a grinding war of attrition against the country's economic, social and defensive infrastructure. The principal aim of the internal front was described as the initiation of military actions in the cities of Nicaragua's Pacific Coast—the country's economic and demog-

raphic heartland—to complement the "political front" of legal opposition.

The direct participation of two priests in these activities, together with extensive circumstantial evidence of greater involvement on the part of the Catholic church indicates a growing convergence between this institution and the counterrevolution. The government emphasized, however, that it views the involvement of the priests as an isolated case, and was in no way implicating the church as a whole. "In order to demonstrate the spirit of understanding that we seek with the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference, we are handling this as an isolated incident," said Interior Minister Tomas Borge, who has discussed the situation at length with the church hierarchy.

The contra network was cracked open June 17, with the arrest of its leader Pedro Hernan Espinoza Sanchez, known as "El Pez" (the fish) to the Somocistas. In a lengthy June 20 press conference, El Pez recounted three years of counterrevolutionary activity, beginning in early 1981, when he established initial contact with the Somocistas. He then carried out propaganda activities while managing a sugar company outside Managua. Working under the FDN he was given \$600 a month to set up a "regional high command" for the internal front in Matagalpa. Although El Pez says he managed to assemble a group of 14 men, including seven members of the Workers Federation, most of the group fled the country before carrying out its first operation—the murder of two Cuban teachers—once the Sandinista army got wind of the Matagalpa plotting.

A PRIEST CAUGHT IN THE ACT

He then established a headquarters near the capital and began setting up cells made up of rightist trade unionists, religious leaders and professionals. According to El Pez's testimony, he also put together an "Internal Front National Board," which included the priests Pena and Pacheco, and Carlos Acevedo of the Association of Nicaraguan Professionals, among others. He also received military training in Honduras geared to sabotage actions.

The most damaging evidence against those arrested is a video tape made by Sandinista security forces, which documents meetings, some attended by the priest Pena, where vari-

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ous forms of sabotage and terror killings were planned. On the tape, Pena is seen discussing the church's anti-government tactics: "I have to say that now we're preaching passive resistance, but when the time comes we know that there's nothing peaceful. When this thing breaks, the church must call on the Christian Command to destroy the CDS." (CDS are the Sandinista Defense Committees, the country's largest mass organization; they are organized block by block.)

Nicaraguan security forces decided not to arrest Pena, placing him instead in the custody of the Vatican's embassy in Managua. The only others arrested were those actually appearing in the film because, according to Cerna, "We don't arrest people solely on the basis of testimony from prisoners, but only when actually caught in counterrevolutionary activity."

The church hierarchy, meanwhile, went on the offensive, claiming, in the words of Managua Archbishop Miguel Obando Y Bravo, that "the whole thing is a tremendous setup. The people who are trying to involve Pena are the same ones who have harassed the church on numerous occasions. These people are artists who can imitate the voice and also the face. We know the methods they can use." On June 21, the Bishops' Conference issued a communique claiming that "the church is the victim of a setup" and absolving Pena of all charges.

Following the release of the communique, the Sandinista newspaper Barricada noted in an editorial that, "The revolutionary government has clearly distinguished between the individual responsibility of a counterrevolutionary

priest and the church, without extending any accusation to the latter. By absolving Pena and responding to the proof with a defensive, incoherent and absurdly insidious language, the Bishops' Conference reacts as if it were interested in implicating itself."

Meanwhile, the contras' southern front is apparently headed toward the same fate as its internal front. Taking advantage of the current disarray within the Costa Rican-based ARDE, the Sandinista army carried out "Operation Sovereignty" from June 4-16, with the objective of eliminating all contra forces in the southern Nicaraguan department of Rio San Juan. According to Cpt. Bosco Centeno, head of the operation, over 200 ARDE members were killed, while at least 500 were forced to retreat back over the Costa Rican border. ARDE representatives in the Costa Rican capital acknowledged that since the crisis with their chief Eden Pastora, who has now been expelled from ARDE, and the Sandinista offensive, the group is "leaderless, demoralized and without the will to fight."

And in the north, the situation is also becoming bleak for the contras. The "general offensive" launched by the FDN in March is currently "on hold," according to a Sandinista military spokesman. Army troops have inflicted over 1300 casualties on FDN forces in the area in 156 battles in the last three months.

There is now only sporadic fighting in the north, but a new antigovernment offensive is expected to develop in the coming weeks in an attempt to disrupt the July 19 celebrations of the fifth anniversary of the Sandinista revolution. ■